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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 October 1984

The Thai-Lao Border Dispute:
Continuing to Fester []

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Summary

Thailand has announced that it will withdraw Army units from three isolated villages on the Thai-Lao border to defuse a six-month territorial dispute with Laos. Such a move by Thailand may founder, however, because of Vientiane's efforts to exploit the issue. Laos, with Vietnamese and Soviet encouragement, has taken the dispute to the UN in an effort to discredit Thailand's bid for a Security Council seat when the voting takes place later this month. Although we do not expect Vientiane's efforts will permanently damage Thailand's chances for Security Council membership, the Lao strategy may prevent Thailand, and especially the Thai Army, from backing away gracefully. []

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The Dispute Until Now

[] Last March Lao troops began harassing Thai crews building a road near the contested area. In mid-April Lao forces attacked Thai border defense units and occupied the villages of Ban Mai, Ban Klang, and Ban Sawang. [] the Lao wanted to halt construction of the road, which Vientiane

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This memorandum was prepared by [] Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis, and was coordinated with the Office of Soviet Analysis and the Office of Global Issues. Information available as of 9 October 1984 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA, []

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claims is on its territory, designed to link Nan, Uttaradit, and Udon Thani Provinces to an existing road system in Nong Khai Province. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Bangkok raised the stakes in June following a border visit by Army Commander-in-Chief General Athit Kamlang-ek when elements of three regular battalions, reportedly dispatched to protect road crews, seized the villages. Lao troops have harassed Thai positions but they have made no serious effort to reoccupy the disputed territory. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Both sides have reinforced the area in recent months.

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New Developments

[REDACTED] The border dispute has divided senior Thai officials in recent months. Foreign Minister Siddhi contended the Army should withdraw to avoid damaging what had been slowly improving relations with Laos. National Security Council and Army officials, however, argued against moving unilaterally. They feared action suggesting Thai capitulation would weaken or even bring down Prime Minister Prem's government. Nonetheless, Siddhi apparently prevailed because on 2 October the Foreign Ministry announced that Thailand would unilaterally withdraw. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Until then, diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute had failed. The issue of demilitarizing the contested area, with Vientiane insisting upon a unilateral Thai withdrawal and Bangkok calling for a bilateral withdrawal, was the primary impediment. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Despite Siddhi's announcement, the Army's withdrawal plans are unclear and it may be engaged in delaying tactics. The Thai UN Ambassador indicated that the withdrawal would be completed by 6 October. [REDACTED] however, General Athit ordered Army units in the disputed villages to [REDACTED]

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withdraw by 31 October but did not specify how far the troops should pull back or the new deployment positions. Army commanders, confused by Athit's order, reportedly plan to pull back two kilometers and probably will assume positions on high ground in the area with Thai volunteer troops remaining in the villages. Continuing Lao efforts to prolong the conflict probably would halt the Thai withdrawal. []
[] the Army has retained the option of retaliating if Laos tries to seize vacated areas. []

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The UN Angle

[] The Indochinese countries, with Soviet support, have attempted to gain maximum propaganda value out of the conflict. Vientiane launched a concerted propaganda campaign against the Thai actions. Vietnamese influence also is apparent in Lao propaganda which portrays Laos as the victim of Thai aggression orchestrated by China. Vientiane's release last month of a "White Book" on Thai-Lao relations, alleging the resurgence of historic "pan-Thai tendencies" and collusion with China, resembled a Vietnamese-inspired effort by the Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea in 1983. []

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[] Laos, probably with Vietnamese encouragement, has taken the dispute to the UN in an effort to defeat Thailand's Security Council candidacy. The Security Council President granted Vientiane's request and convened a council meeting, on 9 October. In addition, we believe Vietnam has seized upon the dispute to try to strengthen its negotiating position at the United Nations on the Kampuchean issue. Hanoi probably will use the border dispute to try to weaken support for the ASEAN UN resolution condemning the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea. We expect the Lao and the Vietnamese maneuvers will have little impact other than temporarily embarrassing the Thai. Bangkok remains in a favorable position to defeat the Soviet-sponsored Mongolian candidacy for the Asian seat on the Security Council and Hanoi, [] is resigned to defeat on any UN initiatives involving its Kampuchea policy. []

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Looking Ahead

[] We expect Thai forces will gradually vacate the three villages but remain in the disputed area. For its part, Laos probably will continue harassing Thai units to keep the dispute alive for a few more weeks. Press reports indicate Lao troops attacked Thai positions in Ban Mai and Ban Klang on 7 October. Nonetheless, once Thai Army units withdraw and the UN General Assembly ends its session, we expect Laos to moderate its

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[redacted]

position on the issue. Although renewed negotiations are unlikely, Laos may cease harassment of Thai forces clearing the way for Bangkok's exit. [redacted]

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[redacted] Thailand in any case probably is preparing to concede the disputed territory. General Athit's withdrawal order instructed Army units to prepare the villages for inspection by unspecified international observers by 1 November. Moreover, [redacted] the road is being directed away from the contested area. [redacted] all available evidence, possibly including the Army's survey of the disputed area in August, points to Lao ownership and this suggests to us the Thai have recognized that their position is untenable. The inspection by international observers probably is meant to provide a way out for Bangkok without embarrassing the Thai Army. [redacted]

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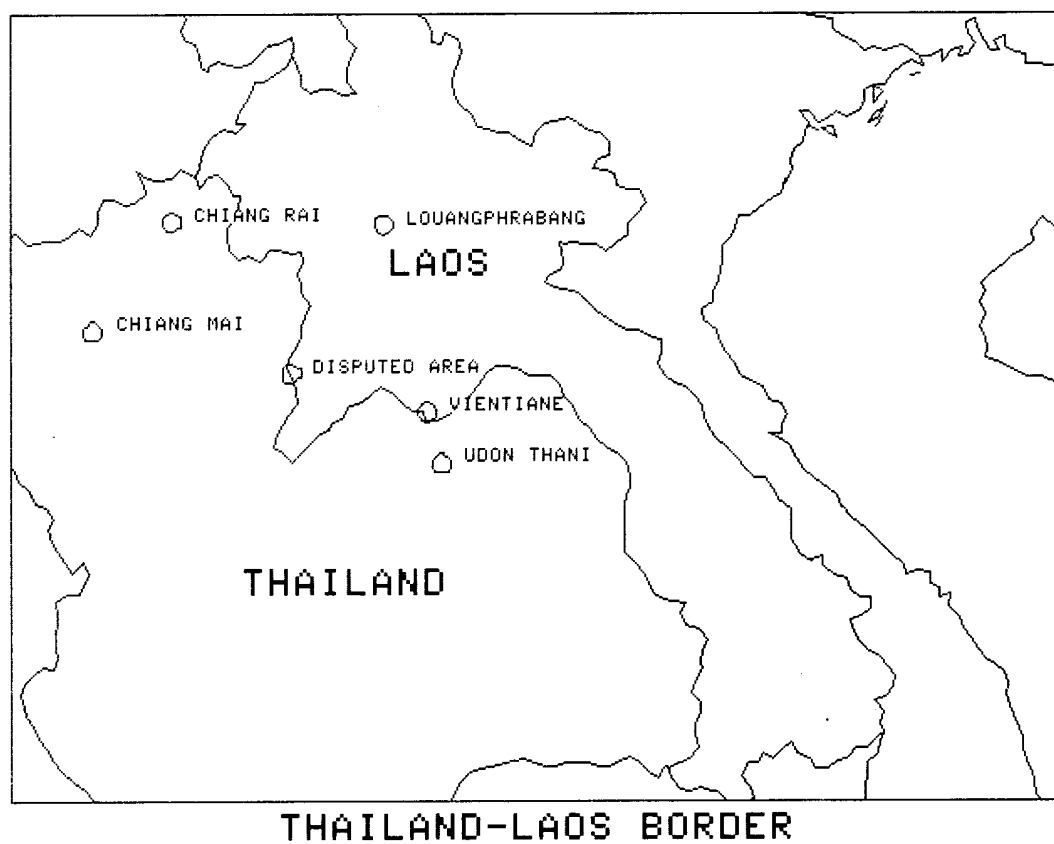
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